

12-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Bista, Krishna Ed.D. (2017) "Role of Intermediary Recruiters in Higher Education Preparation: Perceptions of Nepalese Students in the United States," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol9/iss1/6>

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Role of Intermediary Recruiters in Higher Education Preparation:
Perceptions of Nepalese Students in the United States

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Abstract

Higher education in the United States has long been attractive to international students. International students from many countries seek the assistance of recruiters or educational agents when collecting information about colleges and college application in preparation for studying abroad. This study examines how educational agents facilitate Nepalese students in their U.S. higher education preparation. The author analyzes survey and interview data from 112 Nepalese students to investigate the experiences and issues Nepalese students typically face when preparing to study abroad and the ways in which educational agents are utilized to mitigate those issues. Results suggest that Nepalese students use educational agents to assist in finding a college at which to study. The agents are also instrumental in aiding students in creating and completing applications and procuring other required documents such as bank letters and visas, and in helping students prepare for English proficiency examinations. Students' experiences in using the agents are comparatively positive, and students who participated in this study felt they could trust the educational agents. However, the agents' service fees were often higher than the amount determined by the Educational Consultancy Association of Nepal (ECAN), and some other negative experiences also surfaced in the research.

Keywords: agents; brokers; college selection; higher education; international students; Nepalese students; recruiter; study abroad; student mobility

Studying abroad is popular among college students in Nepal. The major overseas destinations for Nepalese students are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The number of Nepalese students studying in the U.S. has increased in the last two decades. In 1990, there were about 600 Nepalese students studying abroad in the U.S. By 2010, the number had risen to 11,233 (Open Doors, 2013). In the 2015-2016 academic year, there was a slight decrease in the number (to 9,662). Of these students, 45% of students were undergraduates, 40% were graduates, 2% were non-degree seeking students and 13% were optional practical training students in the U.S. In the same year, the total international student population (1,043,839) at U.S. universities contributed \$35.8 billion to the U.S. economy. Texas and Ohio were the top destinations for Nepalese students in 2015-16—although California hosted the largest total number of international students (Open Doors, 2016). Nepal's contemporary civil war and political instability, poverty, inadequate educational prospects, and the limited resources and technology are some of the major factors influencing Nepalese students to study overseas (Murshed & Gates, 2005; Nepal timeline, 2014; Nikku, 2013; Thapaliya, 2016; Thieme, 2017).

Overseas education preparation involves finding a program of interest at a university, finding a suitable university location for the student, and obtaining financial resources to afford the student visa, application, and other fees. The struggle for Nepalese students to study in the U.S. begins with the college application and student visa process (Thapaliya, 2016). To help students navigate these tasks, there are over 370 educational consultancies in Nepal—mostly located in the country's capital, Kathmandu—meant to assist bright students who can afford higher education abroad (About ECAN, 2016). Educational agents at these consultancies help students find institutions of their choice depending on the students' test scores and educational backgrounds. Agents also help students in preparing college applications and procuring necessary documentation for study abroad, including the students' I-20 certificates (*i.e.*, the certificate that confers "non-immigrant student status," issued by the U.S. government in conjunction with the college at which the student will be studying). Finally, agents assist students in their preparation for visa interviews and English proficiency examinations. In addition to these educational consultancies, educational centers of foreign embassies such as the United States Educational Foundation (USEF) and the British Council are also considered resources for Nepal students who wish to study overseas.

The purpose of this paper is to study how Nepalese students use the intermediary agents to facilitate their U.S. higher education preparation by analyzing the experience of 112 students. The following questions guided the study:

1. How did Nepalese students obtain information about the U.S. colleges and universities when they were in Nepal?
2. What were the factors that motivated the students to study in the U.S.?
3. Why did Nepalese students choose to use an agent for services in preparation for a U.S. education?
4. What were the major challenges encountered by Nepalese students while making preparations to study in the U.S.?

Higher Education in Nepal and Study Abroad Trends

Nepal, a small Himalayan nation in South Asia, has recently undergone socio-political transformation from monarchy to democracy (Tin, 2013). Since 2001, not only has the royal family been killed in a coup, but 15 prime ministers have also been appointed and ousted, one after another as a result of political distrust and chaos (“First to Current,” 2016). There are ten universities in Nepal, nine public and one private. These universities in Nepal serve 27.80 million people (World Bank, 2014). In the country, political appointees of governing parties heavily influence the Nepalese institutions of higher education, causing instability in the nature of the education provided at such institutions; there is also unstable national government in general (Nikku, 2013; Tin, 2013). In conjunction with these issues, social stratification in Nepal based on caste and ethnicity, along with gender discrimination and corruption, are ever-present problems (Bennett, Lynn, Dahal, & Govindasmy, 2008; Pyakurel, 2011).

Many Nepalese college students express disappointment in the courses and degrees offered at Nepal’s universities (Köbel, 2013). Students believe Nepalese diplomas and degrees to be insufficient or worry that such credentials will not be well-received in other countries. Students are also frustrated by traditional teaching and learning styles, which do not emphasize creative or critical thinking skills (Bista, 2012). For Nepalese students, the educational system available in their country lags behind the sort of 21st century education available in other countries (Nikku, 2013). As a result of these concerns, along with the country’s failed government, the number of Nepalese students studying abroad in the last few decades has steadily increased.

The trend of studying abroad is more popular among college students residing in major cities such as Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Dharan than it is among students who attend colleges in remote locations. Academically bright students and/or students who can afford overseas tuition mainly choose the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada for degree programs (British Council, 2012; Thapaliya, 2016). It is important to note that many Nepalese students may be interested in studying abroad but the opportunity is not available to everyone (Nikku, 2013).

Nepalese Educational Agents and Professional Practices

An educational agent who acts as a recruiter or consultant is a third-party agent—either an individual or a company—that offers services to students seeking to study abroad (Hagedorn & Zhang 2011). In Nepal, educational agents started offering their services to students interested in studying abroad in the early 1990s. Before the proliferation of these local third-party agents, Nepalese government entities (including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Policy) and international agencies (including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, foreign embassies, and other INGOs) also offered scholarships and study abroad counseling to nominated students. Today, the Educational Consultancy Association of Nepal (ECAN) is an umbrella organization of educational agents or consultancies located in Kathmandu. The goal of ECAN, which is registered with the Chief District Administration Office in Kathmandu, is to provide proper information, guidance, and counseling to both college age students and their guardians. There are over 300 educational consultancies or agents registered as the members of

the ECAN who provide their services in Nepal (About ECAN, 2016). ECAN only monitors consultancies or agents registered with ECAN.

Consultancies in Nepal do not, for the most part, operate solely as educational advising centers but typically operate as profit-seeking entities. Thieme (2017) writes that Nepalese agents “generally have a negative reputation.... They are also often associated with exorbitant service charges and/or cases of brokering migrants in the grey area where work and education overlap; the migration of nurses from Nepal to the UK is one such example” (p. 244). The government of Nepal has warned students against fraudulent agents and consultancies (“Student Warned,” 2013) because a number of consultancies have cheated students by charging large sums of money and/or providing misleading or false information. Some agents have also been involved in preparing false and fabricated documents such as bank statements, property documents, and institutional letters for Nepalese students (“Agent Cheated,” 2009; Bhattarai, 2013) The government of Nepal does not monitor the activities of the agents, and there is no official record of actual educational consultancies that are offering services in Nepal. In her study, Thieme (2017) interviewed 30 agents in Nepal to understand their professional services for students who wanted to study abroad. Her results indicated the existence of interrelationships between agents, students, and parents, where students and parents also become active agents attempting to benefits from the educational agents. Negative experiences were reported from both sides, including cases of fraud and abusive practices, and disputes about service fees. An agent should be trustworthy and reliable to assist students when providing services (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). This profession requires the knowledge and training to advise students about overseas education, along with familiarity with the institutional and academic cultures of various international destinations and cross-cultural differences. The role of such intermediary agents, when proper ethical guidelines are followed, is to properly assist students in preparation for international education. In Nepal, labor brokers are mainly called manpower agents or recruiters, though Thieme (2017) says, “Nepali educational brokers call themselves ‘consultants’” (p.245). The ECAN has prepared a code of conduct to unify the services of the educational agents in Nepal. The ECAN has developed professional guidelines for such agents, including that the agents must provide accurate information on foreign educational institutes: ...not collect service charges [in excess of] 15,000.00 Nepalese Rupees (Approx. U.S. \$ 155.00); ... not make false arrangements [for the taking] of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), [or] other linguistic matters; ...not mislead, startle, [or] influence wrongly; [and]...not [be involved] in preparing false and fabricated document[s]. (“Code of Conduct,” 2017)

Sometimes, the unscrupulous acts of some educational consultancies extend to their relationships with foreign universities, who benefit directly from the admission of international students who pay full tuition. Cases of such collusion are beginning to appear within international academic discourse. In 2016, U.S. federal agents raided the University of Northern Virginia and Tri-Valley University because these universities were accused of admitting and collecting high tuition from foreign students without requiring them to attend class. Officials and recruiters of these students were also charged with conspiracy to commit visa- and I-20-fraud, money laundering, and the fabrication of false documents (Bartlett, Fischer, & Keller, 2011a, b; Clark, 2010; de Wit, 2016; Fischer, 2011; Jaschik, 2011; Zamudio-Suaréz, 2016).

There are many reports related to both the commercialization of the educational consulting and fraud in international student recruitment, particularly the use of agents and their

services from the developing countries. Additionally, the ethicality of the use of commission-based agents for recruiting international students has fostered an ongoing debate among educators (Choudaha, 2013; de Wit, 2016; Saul, 2016; Thieme, 2017). Altbach and Reisbeg (2013) write:

Agents and recruiters hired on a commission basis have become big business in China and India, but they exist throughout the developing world.... It has been estimated that 80 percent of [applications facilitated] by agents include faked credentials. In some cases, agents are reported to charge both the student and the university, a practice of questionable ethics. (p. 6)

Even in the absence of fraud or other wrongdoing, educators believe that educational agents impart a strong influence on student choices concerning international education (Bista & Dagley, 2015; Pimpa, 2003; Lewin, 2008; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). Various institutions in the U.S. have hosted a large number of international students because of agent influence. Many of these agents are not affiliated or appointed by the universities but may have instead acquired information related to the programs and services offered at those universities from the schools' websites and/or visits to those institutions or from information provided by the agents' own previously placed students. Recent reports show that some American institutions of higher education have declined to accept applicants whose applications have been facilitated by the use of commission-based agents due to the lack of transparency and ethical concerns involved with doing so (de Wit, 2016) For example, *The New York Times* recently published cases from Western Kentucky University that used the Indian educational agency Global Tree Education Consultants to recruit 106 students—each of whom paid a 15% commission to the agency (about \$2000 per student)—and on behalf of whom the agents facilitated applications without adequate quality control (Saul, 2016). The agents had exploited the situation for financial gain, and many students were sent back home, as they did not meet the university's program requirements.

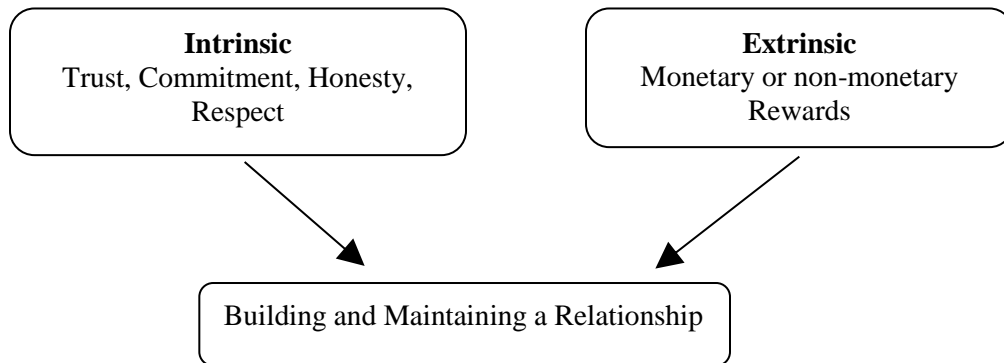
Conceptual Framework - Agency Theory

The literature on agency theory provides a conceptual framework for this study for identifying the dynamic nature of educational consultancies and Nepalese students' behavior concerning requests for help in their study abroad preparation. Agency theory explains contractual relations between two parties such as intermediary agents and students. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011, p. 6) explain that "agency theory identifies the opportunistic proclivities of agencies" and describe how agents maximize their own benefits by emphasizing their interests over those of customers. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) concluded that the professional agents are in a position of power over students and parents who wanted their children to study overseas. The authors found that some agents continued to offer their services knowing they were unable to provide accurate information.

In the case of Nepalese education consultancies, agents receive monetary rewards from the students/parents and also a commission from the universities where students are placed. In this process, students rely on the agents for admission procedures and paper work as the agents build a level of "trust" and "commitment" with the student. This interchange creates a power relationship among students, agents, and institutions (Huang, Raimo, & Humfrey, 2016). The research questions, findings, and interpretation of this study are based on the conceptual framework of agency theory. For instance, students trust the agents and also pay the agent's fees

in order to apply to overseas colleges. Agents are then motivated to place students in university settings that offer rewards for student admissions. This process builds a strong relationship between students/parents, agents, and universities when the trust and monetary rewards come together. The following figure shows the interplay of “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” motivation as a part of agency theory as the educational agent provides services and receives monetary rewards for those services.

Figure 1. A Relationship between Educational Agents, Students and Institutions



Note. This figure is developed based on agency theory and international education recruitment (O’Connell & Wong, 2010).

Eisenhardt (1989) claims that agency theory is a new but challenging theory that may offer insight into the way agencies operate. Agency perspectives are useful tools to study many challenges in marketing, administration, and higher education. Kivisto (2008) used agency theory to explain why the government needs to verify the accountability of universities. Kivisto concluded agency theory helped better understand the relationship between the government and the university by studying the role of information, interests, and incentives. Kahn (2009) used agency theory as a *modus vivendi* or ‘way of life’ for oneself in the decision regarding whether to participate in higher education. He studied how individuals choose to use agencies when making decisions about entering higher education and saw a relationship between social and cultural structures while establishing a *modus vivendi*. In the context of Nepal, language, culture, politics, and socio-economic status of students and parents may contribute to understanding the bigger picture of agency theory.

Research Method

Data and Sample

This study used a sequential exploratory mixed method approach. Quantitative data received from an online survey provided comparable descriptive indicators of Nepalese students’ overseas preparation as well as interactions with intermediary agents while seeking U.S. college placement. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews also helped researchers explore the dynamics of the preparation strategies used to by Nepalese students, the services received from the agents, and the students’ overall experiences using agents to gain a U.S. university placement. A mixed method study, as Mertens (2015, p. 304) says, helps research

“achieve alternative perspectives that are not reduced to a single understanding.” In this study, interview data were included to investigate and draw valid conclusions about the use of agent phenomenon. The interview data are intended to clarify results found in the survey by providing a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon associated with this study.

The online survey did not collect any information identifying the participants such as their names, addresses, telephone numbers, or the colleges they were attending at the time of the survey. All items on the questionnaire were marked “required” in order to avoid incomplete responses. A link to the survey was posted on an educational discussion forum, a social networking site for Nepalese students. A convenience sampling strategy was selected, as Nepalese students were available from this social site. Only Nepalese students attending American institutions of higher education at the time the survey was conducted were asked to respond to the online survey. One hundred Nepalese students ($n = 100$) completed the survey in the study.

Table 1.
Demographics Characteristics of Participants in the Study ($N = 112$)

| | | Survey Participants | Interview Participants |
|---------------------------|------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Age Group</i> | 18-22 yrs. | 51 | 6 |
| | 22-26 | 30 | 4 |
| | 26-30 | 13 | 2 |
| | 30 > | 6 | 0 |
| <i>Education</i> | Undergrad | 70 | 8 |
| | Graduate | 21 | 2 |
| | Doctoral | 7 | 1 |
| | ESL/Other | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Semester Completed</i> | | 56 | 7 |
| | One | 14 | 6 |
| | Two | 30 | 0 |
| | Three > | | |
| <i>Marital Status</i> | Single | 88 | 11 |
| | Married | 12 | 1 |

Note. ESL = English as a Second Language

To better understand the research problem, the researchers invited 20 Nepalese students who were attending a public university in the United States to participate in face-to-face interviews. Twelve participants ($n = 12$) agreed to take part in the interviews. Three group interviews were conducted, and the conversations were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The author extended the interview for 20 to 30 minutes in order to encourage responses from participants. Qualitative data were organized on three themes: motivation to study in the U.S., preparation procedures, and agent services and satisfaction. The interview data and survey data were treated as parallel for the purposes of analysis. In the findings section, data obtained from the survey and interviews are presented side by side.

The final sample of study participants consisted of a total of 112 Nepalese students (100 from the survey and 12 from interviews). Of the total, 34 were female and 78 were male. The majority of the respondents' ages ranged between 18 and 22 years. Most of the participants were unmarried (99) and 13 were married. More undergraduate students (78) participated in the study than graduate students (31).

Instrument and Measures

A survey instrument was designed based on the existing literature of study abroad preparation and the use of agents (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Open Doors, 2016; Pimpa, 2003). Respondents were asked questions to be answered on a Likert scale, such as whether they had, prior to their application to a U.S. institution: (1) attended a professional seminar run by the Nepal U.S. Educational Center or communicated with educational agents, (2) communicated with the admissions staff and professors from the U.S. institutions they ended up attending, or (3) checked the college websites and program information of those universities. Finally, respondents were also asked whether they had consulted with family members regarding the choice to study abroad and the subsequent application process. Other components on the questionnaire included: why students utilized educational agents (6 items), the experiences related to the use of agents (7 items), factors that motivated the student to study in the U.S. (5 items), and the most difficult things concerning study abroad preparation (5 items). Some demographic variables such as age, academic level, marital status, and total semesters completed in the U.S. were also included in the questionnaire.

Findings

How did Nepalese students obtain information about the U.S. colleges and universities when they were in Nepal? What were the factors that motivated them to study in the U.S.?

The descriptive data analysis shows that 29.3 % of total student respondents ($n = 100$) attended one of the professional seminars run by American universities in Nepal, and 36.9 % of students reported receiving information from the U.S. Education Center, located in Kathmandu. The majority of students (42.5 %) checked college websites to learn about the program and college; 72% emailed their friends and relatives for additional information, and more than half of the students (57%) applied to more than one university for admission. Sixty percent of students also emailed their prospective professors and admissions staff seeking information while they were in Nepal. Of the total, 85 % of students received their college offer letters and I-20s on time from the college, and 70.7% of the students reported that they were prepared to attend the American college/university of their choice as a result of prudent preparation.

A correlation analysis (not a cause and effect analysis) indicated that the students who attended a study abroad seminar significantly correlated with the students who wrote emails to professors and staff, $r = .32$. Students who attended seminars also reported that they applied to one or more colleges for admission $r = .21$. The number of students who said that they were well prepared to attend the U.S. college was positively correlated with the number of students who visited college websites for information about the college and the program of their interests, $r = .24$, (all $ps < .01$).

Several factors including family, peers, and agents proved to have influenced the Nepalese students' choice to study in the U.S. Three quarters of students (75%) were motivated to pursue higher education in the U.S. because of the quality of the American education or perceived value of the degree. The study showed a direct relationship between the quality of a

U.S. education and the respondents' perceived chances at a better career or job promotion. Seventy three percent of students reported the positive value of American education affecting their future job options. Family and peer pressure (27%) was another factor influencing the choice of studying abroad for Nepalese students. Twenty-nine percent of respondents received scholarships or graduate assistantships or teaching fellowships, which also motivated them to pursue their education in the U.S.

All of the students that participated in the interviews attended a professional seminar and received information about preparing to study abroad. During their preparation process, Nepalese students requested additional information via emails, and some of the participants reported that they did not receive replies. For instance, one undergraduate participant said, "I emailed and asked the university for my room reservation but did not hear back...." Another undergraduate student mentioned an inability to contact the U.S. university directly, without going through the agent, saying:

I wrote a message and left in the email tab of future students of the university, asking for instructions on how to be admitted to the university, looking for more information. My email went to [name of agent]. I was confused. Later I [learned] that the response came from an agent of the university, located in India.

When respondents visited the websites of prospective universities, they often reported receiving program information. A student participant said, "I got a lot of information from the [university website] and found out about housing and about application forms. I downloaded application forms and everything all from the website." This participant also received a scholarship from the university that covered school expenses: "I got scholarships which helped me a lot.... My expenses were supposed to be paid by my parents, but lot of my expenses ended up being paid by scholarships."

Some students reported that they attended at least two or three seminars run by American universities in Nepal. Agents assisted them in selecting colleges and completing applications. Some students applied to more than two colleges for admission. An undergraduate Nepalese student said he received his information from friends, relatives and agents, saying:

I went to find a lot of resources and talked to many people, [talked] to my friends, [talked] to others, and in that process, I went to talk to one of the agencies, and you know they were helpful.... They have a lot of information about international studies...and I went there ... and ... [applied to] five universities.

Some respondents had immediate and frequent interactions with their friends and family members when it came time to make decision in studying overseas. Another participant reported the following experience:

I attended three seminars...in Nepal. I had couple of friends who were studying [in the U.S.], and I talked to them, and they said it was good, and then I researched [it] online and [applied] to a couple of more universities.

Why did the Nepalese students choose to use agents for preparing for a U.S. education?

Nepalese students shared various reasons for using agents prepare to study abroad: Over 56 % of participants reported that they lacked the knowledge of the college application process; 47% of students reported not knowing about the visa application process; 37% of students reported lacking the knowledge to apply to foreign universities. Nearly a quarter of all students (24%) believed they were more likely to be accepted in both the college admission and the U.S.

visa processes if they used an agent for the application process. Thirty-two percent of students did not use an agent when applying to American colleges/universities.

The interview data indicated that there were several other factors that influenced Nepalese students when they were choosing an agent for help with their study abroad preparation. Students were not familiar with the application deadlines in the U.S. The educational system in Nepal is different, as colleges and universities do not have fall, spring and summer intakes, as they do in the U.S. In addition, some students missed the deadlines for testing because of a lack of knowledge about the standardized test dates (including the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the International English Language Testing System, and the Graduate Record Exam). Respondents also reported that they did not know how to make linear progress in the whole process of study abroad because it includes several steps of preparation, from seeking an institution to preparing for an English test and a visa interview and financing university expenses.

The focus group that was interviewed in person discussed why students decided to use agents to help them study abroad. Participants mentioned that they lacked the knowledge about studying abroad. One undergraduate student stated, “When I [applied the] first time abroad, I was totally [unfamiliar with the process]. I was alone, and depended very much on [the] consultancy for my I-20 and going through all documents.” Another participant said,

It was [my] first time [studying] abroad, and I did not know how to [proceed],...and so I [applied] through [a] consultancy; they did all my things, guided me in the study. If we [apply through a] consultancy, they do not miss any documents to send the college.

When asked what kinds of services students received from the agent, one participant said, ... documenting and guidelines...and after I got my visa and everything, they would just call everyone who got a visa and give us information about the location where we would be...like, [through] videos and stuff, and they told us all the facts about the location and what people we [would] see and what language we’ll be speaking and ... what kind of environment we will have. ...It was pretty helpful for me.

Interviewees clearly relied on the information provided by the agents, whether that information was accurate or not.

What service did Nepalese students receive from the agents when they were in Nepal?

Participants were questioned regarding their experiences of using the agents when they were in Nepal and planning to attend an American university. Student responses suggested that educational consultancies (agents) offered a variety of services to students and parents, such as help finding a college of the students’ choice based on their scores on the English tests (TOEFL/IELTS) and previously college grades, if applicable. Agents also assisted applicants in the submission of applications, preparation of bank documents and visa interview papers, and the securing of travel itineraries, airport pickup, and housing in the host country.

Of the total, 67% of the students reported that they were assisted in applying to universities and applying for other documents such as a visa. Just over half of all students, 55.1 %, received advice from the agents about different colleges and universities abroad. Forty percent of students were influenced to pursue an international education after they met with the agents. Of the total, 49% of students trusted the educational agent through whom they applied, and a quarter of students (25 %) reported that agents cheated them through inaccurate counseling. Finally, 47.4 % of all students said that the service fees they had been charged for the

services provided were “high,” *i.e.*, exceeding the amount set by the ECAN code of conduct (approximately U.S. \$155).

In the correlation coefficient analysis (see, Table 2), the data show that the agents’ advice was significantly correlated with the students using an agent to apply, $r = .67$. Students who had agents that offered information on foreign countries and colleges were very likely to have the agents assist them in applying to college and for the procuring of other necessary documents. Similarly, agents’ advice was positively correlated with influencing the students’ choice of college, $r = .72$; with trust for the agent, $r = .62$; with high service fees, $r = .47$; and with the agents’ unethical activity (cheating), $r = .57$ (all $ps < .001$). These correlation pairs are positive and moderate in nature (Cohen, 1998).

Table 2.

Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviation for the Use of Agents

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|----|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|
| 1. Agents advised me on foreign countries and college choices. | 1 | .67 ** | .62** | .72** | .47** | .57** | 1.65 | .80 |
| 2. I was assisted in making application and other documentation. | -- | 1 | .58** | .55** | .49** | .52** | 1.52 | .80 |
| 3. I trusted educational agent that I applied through. | -- | -- | 1 | .59** | .37** | .43** | 1.78 | .85 |
| 4. Agents influenced my choice of international education. | -- | -- | -- | 1 | .58** | .67** | 1.84 | .80 |
| 5. Agents’ service fees were too high (expensive). | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | .56** | 1.81 | .85 |
| 6. Agents cheated me from incorrect counseling and services. | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 2.06 | .75 |

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation ** Correlation is significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Students in the focus group also admitted receiving help from the agents (for a fee) in creating illegal documents in order to appear to have greater financial resources than they actual had. One undergraduate participant said:

Agents helped me a lot to make [a] bank certificate. They helped me to make a bank statement of US \$ 300,000.00 although that was a fake and I did not have that amount in reality; I paid [a] service charge for that help as well as a gift of about US \$200 [to demonstrate my gratitude] after receiving the U.S. visa.

Another participant also shared similar information about receiving help creating fraudulent bank statements, though this individual received help from his relative, not an educational agent. He reported:

I did not use a consultancy, but I have a relative [who works at a] bank, and I paid him a certain amount for making [up a] bank document that was not original. But instead of paying a high service fee to consultancy, I worked with my relative and paid him only \$800 for [a] fake certificate [showing that I possessed] US \$ 320,000.00.

Interview participants reported that they received all types of information from educational agents related to studying abroad including college admission, fees and tuition, English language requirements, and immigration paperwork. An undergraduate participant described to the researcher his level of comfort while working with agent in his local language during his preparation to study in the U.S. saying,

Well, [when] dealing with consultancy, they will show you what you need like how much ...you need to pay.... While dealing with all of the stuff in person, they will give you more information, and I could ask them more questions, and [it was a] reliable [way] for me to [get information while speaking] in my own language, so it [was quite] helpful.

Although some information this student had received was inaccurate, another interview participant said that he was satisfied overall with the services he received from his consultancy. He said:

[The] consultancy helped me find out [about] the I-20; then they helped me to manage some documents that I needed to get approved at [name of the university].[In truth], a lot of things that they mentioned ... [were not accurate]. For example, they [told] me that this university likes to provide you free [textbooks]...[to borrow from] the library and stuff like that. When I went to the library I didn't find the textbook[s] I needed for my class; all there was there [were regular library] reference book[s].

Another participant who was helped by an agent, mainly in document preparation, paid a fee of about US \$100. In his opinion, the \$100 fee was expensive even though that amount falls within in the guidelines set by ECAN.

Did students receive reliable information from the agents who helped them prepare their documents?

When Nepalese students were asked about their experience in receiving reliable information while working with agents, 38% of students reported most information they received was accurate; 21% of student replied that it was generally accurate, and 11% replied that the information provided was “not at all” accurate. Of the total number of students sampled, 30% of the students did not use any services from the agents.

To investigate any differences in the instances of male versus female students being cheated by educational agents, a chi-square analysis was conducted. Assumptions were checked and were met. Table 3 shows the Pearson chi-square results indicate that there was no significant difference between male and female students reporting on whether they felt cheated or not ($X^2 = 4.85$, $df = 2$, $N = 96$, $p = .088$). Eta result (.20) shows a weak association between the gender and students who said the agents cheated them.

Table 3.
Chi-square Analysis of the Agents' Behaviors among Males and Females

| Variable | <i>n</i> | male | female | X^2 | <i>p</i> |
|--|----------|------|--------|-------|----------|
| Agents cheated me by providing false information | | | | | |
| <i>Agree</i> | 24 | 15 | 9 | 4.85 | .088 |
| <i>Disagree</i> | 42 | 28 | 14 | | |
| <i>N/A</i> | 30 | 26 | 4 | | |
| Totals | 96 | 69 | 27 | | |

Note. *n* = number of participants, *p* > .05 (not significant), *N/A* = not applicable.

Interview data also confirmed that most Nepalese students went to an educational consultancy for an initial consultation. Students said that there were many consultancies from which to choose—almost one or two agent offices in every building in the Putalisadak area of Kathmandu—most of which offer free counseling for the first session. This suggests that agents may try to attract more students by offering a free first session and an attractive package if the student should choose to apply through that agency. Participants shared that they checked with their friends and family for references regarding the agents before selecting one.

A few participants mentioned being given inaccurate information about college tuition and also reported being charged extra fees by the same agent. Some agents even refused to complete any paper work if students did not pay the requested additional fee. A graduate student in a focus group said:

The agents gave me [inaccurate] information about college tuition, [and] I was asked to pay more than [the total tuition indicated on] ... the I-20s. ... The agents [also] told me that if I did not pay them, I would be sent back from the immigration or port of entry.

Another participant said, “When I was in Nepal, I made a draft of US \$ 5,000 but when I came here, it was not paid to the college; the consultancy used only US \$400 out of [that payment] to pay the college.” One interview participant compared the U.S. currency value in the Nepalese market and he said he paid an expensive service fee to the agents for counseling although he prepared most of his paperwork himself:

I took a TOEFL [preparation] class from agent-run center, and they would just bring those pamphlets and stuff in the class...the price was really high. ...They would just ask us to bring all the documents, and we did the things ourselves; they just...gave us information, that’s it, and I think the fees were pretty high for ... [such counseling].

In another interview, a participant said that it was difficult to evaluate which information was correct or not as he visited multiple agents and applied to more than five universities. Overall, his experience with agents was positive, and he considered the information received helpful:

[The information] seemed pretty accurate but not when you [compare it to your] experience...here. It is different compared to how you hear it even if... it [was] the same thing. [The agents] gave us the brief information, but ... I was applying to so many universities so it was like little bit of everything. But after I got the visa, it was just about one location so it was more helpful.

Interview data suggested Nepalese students used agents in preparation for application to U.S. universities and were satisfied with the services they received, built a good relationship with agents, and even subsequently referred their friends to those agents. A few students said they were informally still in touch with agents. For example, one undergraduate student said: “I’m satisfied...because my only concern was to get [to the U.S.] and then [get]... my education. I’m actually still in contact with them; you know I even suggest my friends to go there.”

What were the major challenges encountered by Nepalese students while making preparations to study in the U.S.?

Nepalese students reported that they faced some challenges during their preparation because of the limited resources in Nepal such as the lack of Internet, computers, and other educational resources. For a U.S. education, some students relied on the resources available at the American Center, an official information center of the U.S. Education in Nepal. The British Council also provided services on study abroad and test preparation in Nepal. Students reported that there were no professional standardized test preparation courses in Nepal that were taught by native English speakers. Many students said they either self-prepared for the English tests or depended on the non-native English speakers who taught at the agent-run learning centers.

In the survey, when asked about difficulties they encountered while trying to study abroad, 65% of all students reported that they had a difficult time choosing a university or college in the U.S.; 36% of students faced problems in preparing for standardized tests; and 36% found difficulty in preparing legal documents such as property statements, bank certificates, and English translations. Some students (26%) found difficulty in receiving their I-20s (admission documents) and offer-letters from the colleges. Only 4% of respondents reported they experienced a hard time booking travel after they received their visa because of a shortage of flights.

Students in the interviews also expressed that paperwork was the most difficult part of their international study preparation. Students’ preparation involved at least three phases: first, preparing for exams and achieving high enough scores on the college entrance exams (TOEFL or IELTS or ACT); second, selecting the college and program of interest and applying within deadlines; third, completing personal paperwork (birth certificates, translations, relationship verifications, financial transactions) and practicing for visa interviews. When asked what paperwork was the most difficult to collect or prepare one participant said, “...documents for the I-20 then documents for my relationship status, family relationship status, banking paper....” The same student also said his level of language proficiency (both written and spoken) and familiarity with the U.S. classroom expectations provided much more challenge than the preparation he had done in Nepal. Another student said that his preparation was not difficult, as he received information from the Internet and Facebook friends:

Of course, the internet and then you can talk to...people [in] groups, international groups on Facebook, and websites that you can go [to] and then...send your queries and...ask somebody, and of course somebody will respond back.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

Studying overseas is a growing trend among Nepalese college students. Over 300 educational consultancies have been assisting college-bound students in Nepal by offering services in college selection, application, and visa preparation. The results of this study suggest

that agents and other sources offered Nepalese students support in their pursuit of higher education in the U.S. The students were motivated to study abroad in the U.S. by the quality of education available, the promise of future job opportunities in the U.S., and other socio-economic benefits and opportunities. For college information, most Nepalese students attended professional seminars run by the U.S. Education Centers and American Colleges in Nepal. The majority of students also emailed their friends and prospective professors at various colleges, checked college websites, and collected their I-20s and sent in letters of application on time. Nepalese students used educational agents to find the college of their choice, to fill out college applications, and to prepare other required documents such as English test preparation documents, bank letters, and visa interviews. Students' experience in using an agent was comparatively positive in that the majority of the students found the information offered by the agents to be "more or less accurate." Students also trusted the educational consultancy through which they applied, although there were exceptions.

During their preparation stage, some students reported that it was difficult to find a college to apply to. Indeed, the reasons for using an agent at all for many Nepalese students included a lack of knowledge about U.S. universities and about the college application process, visa interviews, and English test preparation. This seems plausible considering the fact that Nepal has limited overseas education resources and that most outbound students were undergraduate students, aged 25 or younger (Kölbel, 2013; Open Doors, 2016; Thapaliya, 2016). Some students were inclined to use the agents to increase the likelihood of receiving a visa to study in the U.S. For many students, the agents were the only way to make their overseas education successful. This study supports Hagedorn and Zhang's (2011) study of 500 Chinese students. In their study, 66% of students possessed little knowledge about the college application process and over half believed that they were more likely to be accepted if they used agents.

This study also further illustrates the conceptual framework. The findings suggest a triangular relationship between students or parents, educational agents, and the U.S. colleges from which the agents received commission in return for recruiting overseas applicants. There seems to be an interplay of "trust," "monetary reward," and "college programs" for Nepalese students who used agents for college preparation. In the context of Nepalese higher education, studying at home was less attractive because of the unstable government and political activities. Agents can serve as a proxy of resources whether students apply through the agents to study in the United States or other countries (Nikku, 2013). This study also supports the observation that agents often engage in forging documents to assist students in the visa applications (Altbach & Reisberg, 2013; Bartlett et al., 2011, de Wit, 2016; Thieme, 2017). Previous reports on the use of intermediary agents are a matter of debate due to their unethical activities (Choudaha, 2013; Fischer, 2011; Jaschik, 2011; Hulme, Thomson, Hulme, & Doughty, 2014; Saul, 2016). In order to protect Nepalese applicants from potential scams as well as save them money and time, the U.S. Embassy Kathmandu introduced a new policy, as of June 1, 2016, that states that students are no longer required to provide bank statements, land titles, letters of invitation or any similar documents (*i.e.*, those that have historically been most commonly forged or fabricated) ("Change to Tourist," 2016). Students will still need to apply to a college or university, take English proficiency exams, receive an acceptance letter and I-20 from the U.S. institution, and prepare for visa interviews.

There are some limitations associated with this study before the findings are generalized. First, this is an exploratory study using a convenience sample of Nepalese students. Due to the

small sample size, the results should be cautiously interpreted and generalized. Also, the student population sampled for this study comes from a distinct socio-cultural, geo-political context, and their self-reported perceptions in the context of international education may not be applicable for another international student group. Second, this study did not examine the difference in student perceptions and experiences across different locations in the U.S. due to limited sample size. Finally, Nepalese students might have different experiences depending upon whether they did or did not use those using or not using agent services; whether they received or did not receive a U.S. visa; whether they were of graduate or undergraduate age; whether they attended private or public U.S. universities—and what type of university they attended (*i.e.*, research universities with scholarships and teaching universities or community colleges); and whether they come from low or high socioeconomic status. Further research with a broader and larger sample that includes perceptions and perspectives of other Nepalese students, their parents, and agents is recommended.

In the light of these limitations, this study suggests some important implications for student recruitment and overseas education preparation. First, Nepal is a country with potential for international student recruitment (Schulmann, 2013). Students and their parents are in need of reliable information on international education, whether received from agents or overseas colleges. Second, Nepalese students are highly interested in studying in the U.S. and are in need of professional counseling from agents who can provide reliable information related to U.S. programs and universities. The educational agents should make their services reliable, practical, and transparent to the students and parents. The publicizing of information concerning fraudulent practices may help steer students away from consultancies practicing unethically. Third, the U.S.-based international student recruiting agencies and American colleges and universities should be more responsive to their prospective foreign students. Finally, colleges should make available up-to-date and accurate admissions and scholarship information on their websites to assist prospective students (as the majority of participants reported that they checked college websites for such information). In addition, students and agents may benefit from visiting the official websites of the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of State-Bureau of Consular Affairs, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for information regarding travel, immigration, and college programs.

Notes

¹ Acknowledgements

I appreciate comments and suggestions received from Charlotte Foster and Heather Kennedy on my earlier draft. I am also thankful to two anonymous reviewers from the *Journal of International and Global Studies* for their comments.

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